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ABSTRACT

Teaching online with case studies requires innovation and flexibility from both the instructor and the student that extends beyond traditional pedagogy. Online teaching, by nature, is interactive and requires constructivist, collaborative course structures and expectations. In addition to a rich and well-organized Website featuring a variety of cases and resources, several other factors need to be taken into consideration to ensure success, including: course organization, technology skills, case selection and content, assignments, accountability, and relevance. This paper explores these issues from both the instructor and graduate student points of view and makes recommendations for successfully teaching with cases online. (Contains 17 references.) (Author/SM)

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INSIGHTS INTO SUCCESSFULLY TEACHING WITH CASES ON-LINE: THE VIEW FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE 'NET

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INSIGHTS INTO SUCCESSFULLY TEACHING WITH CASES ON-LINE: THE VIEW FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE 'NET

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Abstract

Teaching on-line with case studies requires innovation and flexibility from both the instructor and the student that extends beyond traditional pedagogy. On-line teaching, by nature, is interactive and requires constructivist, collaborative course structures and expectations. In addition to a rich and well-organized Website featuring a variety of cases and resources, several other factors need to be taken into consideration to ensure success including: course organization, technology skills, case selection and content, assignments, accountability, and relevance. This paper will explore these issues from both the instructor and graduate student points of view and make recommendations for successfully teaching with cases on-line.

KEYWORDS: distance learning, teaching strategies, on-line case studies, course design, instructor and student perspectives, on-line assignments

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is rapidly becoming a major force in the way universities deliver courses to students at remote sites [Willis, 1994], often through two-way interactive video technology [Rosenkoetter, 1999]. As has been pointed out, there are also disadvantages to distance learning, one being the lack of face-to-face communication and faculty mentoring for students [Strivaby, 1998].

Learning networks, or teaching and learning on-line via the Internet and World Wide Web are increasingly utilized to deliver content on, and off, campus sites. Frequent and intense faculty-student communications via individualized e-mail and/or discussion groups, and among the students themselves, are common in this virtual medium [Bourne, 1998]. The use of technology in course design may be a larger problem in the delivery of on-line courses than in interactive video, as faculty are not always in front of a group of students delivering content with IT support. On-line options require a keen knowledge of how to use available technology as well as insight into what students need and desire.

Increasing numbers of courses are being delivered on-line to various degrees, as combinations of technology, materials, assignments, and flexibility in distance learning allow for synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences. For example, The Keller Graduate School of Management in Chicago requires students purchase and use a text, view CD-ROMs as needed, view and complete assignments and tests on-line, and appear in person for a proctored final exam [KGSM, 1998].

Some graduate courses use a specialized professional development website for course content, such as CaseNEX, which offers a variety of case-based curriculum strands for teacher educators [see Herbert, 1999; Kent, 1999] including multicultural, gifted, technology, classroom management, special education, and administrative foci. Instructors select approximately 8 cases out of over two dozen cases available for their course, and post the course syllabus and assignments on a password-protected Website [see, http://casenex.org]. Instructors alternate between facilitating case discussions in a wired classroom, or on-line. Activities include: engaging student participation in a virtual case competition and threaded discussion groups; assisting students in producing Web-based projects; discussing the design, content, and pedagogy issues in distance learning; and participating in *iVisit* and streamed video conferences with students and faculty from around the country at other CaseNEX sites, as possible.

TEACHING ON-LINE

As with other distance learning methods, such as interactive video, teaching on-line requires innovation in teaching and course design. The question is not whether a course can be taught on-line but how a course should be taught on-line [Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1997]. This instructor [Sudzina, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001; Sudzina, Kaleta, & Garnham, 2003] has been exploring aspects of getting started with networked or on-line learning such as: active and collaborative learning, network choices for university courses (adjunct, mixed and on-line modes), e-mail and computer conferencing, designs for learning networks, implementation issues, facilitating on-line courses, netiquette and message organizing, and suggestions for interdisciplinary and case study integration. For those of us who have been teaching on-line since the mid-nineties, this has been a fascinating, frustrating, and rewarding journey [see, Sudzina, 2003].

Initially, many on-line courses were compilations of class notes and assignments that mirrored those found in the traditional classroom. The technology was front and center as many of the early difficulties involved compatible software and computer platforms, keeping the network up and running, saving and sending files, and experimenting with various technology innovations such as streamed video, *iVisit*, instant messenger, and RealPlayer video clips. Course web designs were relatively simple and straightforward.

It appears that teaching on-line is entering into a "second generation" of adopters and learners. With email and the web becoming the coin of the realm in many institutions, and the preferred way of communicating, the infrastructure to support on-line learning has exploded. Initial networking issues such as access to, and knowledge of, current hardware and software technology appear to be resolving themselves. However, as the technology surges ahead, and network providers and IT support staff work to keep the software and hardware current, faculty must also move forward in their skills for teaching on-line.

Web design has been elevated to high art and course websites can now offer a variety of teaching options, distance learning alternatives, resources, and tutorials, in addition to course content. As course sites become more sophisticated, so, too, does the amount and quality of content posted on them. However, such web design and technological knowledge is usually beyond the time and expertise of most faculty. Web designers and technological support are usually needed to assist in keeping courses current and viable.

Consequently, many faculty and students are finding themselves in an interesting dilemma in which the range of technology savvy students is increasing every year. As the number of students who have a working knowledge on distance learning increases, so, too, do their expectations of faculty members to be content experts *and* technology experts. The challenge is to involve both the students who know a great deal, as well as those with significantly less knowledge about technology, in engaging content and meaningful assignments. The emphasis must remain on the

course material with the technology as a tool for the delivery of that material. However, that is often more difficult than it sounds.

TEACHING ON-LINE WITH CASES

An area of teaching on-line that is becoming increasingly popular is that of using case studies to illustrate real life problems and applications in content areas such as medicine, business, dentistry, and education. Cases have been gaining in popularity both as a teaching and assessment tool.

Cases studies and case study pedagogy are an excellent match for teaching on-line. Both cases and on-line learning are constructivist by nature. That is, learning occurs when instructors and students co-construct meaning about the dilemma at hand. Instructors act as mentors, facilitators and role models through giving feedback, asking questions, and guiding inquiry. Students can examine dilemmas they are likely to encounter in their professional world in safe settings through a 5-step process of case analysis (see, McNergney, Herbert, & Ford, 1994). The synchronous and asynchronous nature of teaching on-line allows for anytime, anywhere learning that fits well with adult learning preferences.

Rich multilayered, multimedia cases can be posted on-line with appropriate artifacts and resources (see, McNergney & Herbert, 2002). Instructors can facilitate case discussions in real time, or, as part of an on-line threaded discussion. All student voices can be heard in on-line discussions and students can respond to one another or to others studying the same case at a remote site that may be across the country, or in different continents.

Case-based teaching and learning contributes to students developing a community of learners through cooperative and collaborative activities both in class and on-line. Case assignments support the development of expertise in problem-based learning and case analysis, as well as written, research and presentation skills. An additional bonus is the opportunity to use technology to extend learning beyond the classroom walls.

A difficulty in teaching on-line is to stay current with the needs of the students and in the use of technology. Teaching on-line is a moving target in the sense that the instructor must be dynamically involved in all changes and innovations that occur in hardware and software. New updates are occurring on a regular basis, as is information on how best to use them. Additionally, teaching on-line requires more time to prepare for the instructor. Thought must also be given to the appropriate balance of content and assignments that are posted on-line and facilitated in real time.

PURPOSE OF THIS SESSION

This session was designed to assist experienced case facilitators who are transitioning to teaching with cases on-line. There appears to be agreement that a well designed website is a necessary prerequisite for conducting an on-line course. However, even with an excellent website, much the same as with an outstanding text, the instructor needs to decide how best to deliver the information and use that content to best advantage. Therein lies the rub. Teaching on-line, for the most part, is a trial and error process and not for the faint of heart – or the untenured.

Learning on-line also can be challenging for students who are used to more traditional methods and find that on-line courses require additional discipline, time, effort, and technology skills to satisfy course requirements. Course satisfaction varies for those students who enjoy a high level of technological expertise and are independent learners, and those who are not.

The following insights were gleaned from a college professor who has been team teaching a hybrid graduate course on-line with cases studies since 1995, and a teacher who recently completed a similar on-line course as part of her masters program at another institution. Both courses accessed the CaseNEX website and employed many of the same cases, resources, and assignments.

ISSUES IN TEACHING ON-LINE WITH CASES

In addition to a rich and well-organized Website featuring a variety of cases, tutorials, and resources, [e.g., http://casenex.org], several other factors merit additional consideration when teaching on-line such as: course organization, technology skills, case selection and content, assignments, accountability, and relevance. This paper will explore these issues from both the instructor and graduate student point of view and make recommendations for successfully teaching with cases on-line.

An "**I**" and/or a solid bullet mark in each of the following sections will identify the instructor's remarks. The graduate student perspective will be identified by an "**S**" and/or presented in *italics* next to an open bullet mark, for clarity.

COURSE ORGANIZATION

I – Successfully launching an on-line class can be daunting. The entire class must be thought out in detail before the class begins and articulated to students.

- Teaching on-line takes more. It has been my experience that you need to plan the amount of time you think it will take – times three!
  - *Students also need to plan the way they use their time. It can be easy to let time get away from you when there isn't the constant presence of a teacher personally checking in with you face to face. I would suggest that teachers remind students about assignments deadlines whenever the class meets.*
- Clarity in course expectations – both in person and posted to the website - is critical. Failure to do so can result in a flurry of emails asking what really was meant.
  - *I agree – make sure that course expectations correlate to the website. Otherwise, students may not take the class seriously and shut down before they begin. If the expectations are not clear, students have an open-ended excuse as to why they didn't meet expectations and may blame their lack of effort/failure on the teacher.*
- Double-check the dates and assignments posted to the web. It can be very confusing to change dates and assignments once the schedule has been posted. There is always someone that doesn't get the message. Have students check the flash feature weekly on the course homepage for any updates or changes.
  - *Make sure that you post the date when material was uploaded so that students know how current the information is.*
- Always have a Plan B, and a Plan C, so that when the technology fails, (as it inevitably does over the course of a semester), you will still be able to move forward in the class.
  - *Absolutely. In one class, we had a one hour streamed videoconference scheduled with an expert at a remote site. Unfortunately, the sound went down at the beginning of the session. We couldn't read the speaker's lips, so we just sat there. What could have been a very powerful lesson became a frustrating experience, as we had no backup plan.*
- Familiarity with the content and resources on the website is crucial.
  - *Students will inevitably ask questions about both the technology and the content. If the teacher is unfamiliar with what the student is referring to, then the student will most likely conclude that the skill, or idea, is not important.*
  - *Students may confuse the teacher's technological skills with intelligence. Make sure that you are able to complete all the technological skills you expect of your students.*
- Give your students an introduction to the course website and show them how to navigate the web to access content and post assignments.
  - *It is good teaching to give students an orientation to the course website, as all websites are different. Additionally, this helps the students with weak navigation skills and presents the opportunity the answer questions about the course website in class.*

TECHNOLOGY SKILLS

I – It is absolutely critical to have excellent technological support both in software and hardware.

- Know what your technological support options are.
  - *It is also important for your students to know what the tech support options are. I suggest posting IT office hours and phone numbers on your course syllabus.*
- Bring in guest speakers to address technology issues (such as FrontPage or SmartBoard) that students need training in.
  - *Also consider using students in the class for technological support. Many students are technologically advanced. For example, I was a computer lab technician in college and another student in my class wrote HTML code and designed web pages. In class we buddied up with other students who needed help in our particular areas of expertise.*
- Work closely with support staff to learn as much as you can to upgrade your own technology skills.
  - *If the teachers don't know how to use the technology that they are requiring the students to use, students can also lose confidence in the teachers' expertise and knowledge in the content areas. They can start to question the teacher in all areas of the course.*
- When there is a problem (for example, the switch from wired to wireless computers, or a university-wide software upgrade that no longer allows your class access to the web), be prepared to work with staff to seek solutions and work out glitches. Use these opportunities to talk through these issues with your students and model problem-solving behavior when using technology.
  - *Talking to your students about these difficulties lets them know that you understand the problems and are actively engaged in fixing them. This, in turn, instills confidence in the teacher and reduces the stress from students affected by these problems.*
- Screen students' technology skills. Make sure that students can access the course website from off campus and have them post a test message to you.
  - *This is necessary. Otherwise students may use computer accessibility and/or incompatibility as an excuse for not completing assignments. This will help students realize what they really know, not what they think they understand in the technology area.*

CASE SELECTION AND CONTENT

I – The most successful case discussions occur when students are invested in the dilemma.

- When possible, give students a selection of cases to choose from. One possibility is to have them vote on the specific cases that they would like to discuss in order to capitalize on intrinsic motivation in the class.
  - *This will help students take more ownership in class and in their learning. When there are a variety of options, someone's experience may overlap with a case. This person's experience could make the case more concrete for the class by providing another resource and perspective. This may also make the case more authentic as students find out from a peer that it is a real issue in schools.*
- For transfer of skills and knowledge, make sure that the case content is germane to the focus of the class. If the focus of the class is teaching with technology, insure that a technology issue is imbedded in each case.
  - *Students will take more from the class if they have information and numerous examples as to why technology is needed.*

- Select cases that have an element of surprise or uncertainty so that students have to stretch themselves.
    - *If you give students safe "classic" run-of-the-mill cases, you can expect to receive "classic" run-of-the-mill answers, i.e. they can continue to think in the box and fail to seek new or innovative solutions to situations.*
- Make resources available to research case issues.
    - *Make sure that these resources are available on-line.*
- Offer cases that students can identify with on a variety of levels, including an emotional investment in the outcome. What happens in the case should matter to students.
    - *If possible, research or ask about your students' backgrounds to see if there are any cases that would be more realistic than others. Try to give your students the opportunity to relate with the main characters.*
- Offer well written cases that can serve as exemplars and models for future assignments.
- When teaching online, imbed the content in the technology, so that the technology becomes background, and a way to deliver the content, rather the main focus.
    - *I absolutely agree. At the end of the term the class will count as an education course on the students' transcripts and that's where the focus should be – education.*

ASSIGNMENTS

I – Successful assignments create knowledge and skills – not busy work.

- Again, time is a major issue – plan accordingly so that you are not constantly on-line checking student work.
    - *In turn, don't give busy work just to get students to use the technology. It devalues the assignments and students can feel as if they are treading water.*
- Online assignments should extend the learning, not regurgitate it. Ask students to apply their knowledge through applications, open-ended questions, or presenting another point of view, rather than summarizing previously presented case material.
    - *Usually, at this point in students' educational careers, they are all professional regurgitators. Make them think!*
- Have students read and respond to each other's work, via threaded discussion, to get all members of the class involved in the discussion.
    - *This is an easy area for students to fall behind. I suggest that the teacher truly check on the students' work. Bring printouts of some of the on-line discussions to critique in class; it will keep the students on their toes.*
- Students should complete on-line assignments out of class. Otherwise, many of the advantages of using technology are lost if you are having students complete work during regular class time. Use class time to engage in learning that is customized to the needs and interests of the learners and capitalizes on the expertise of the instructor.
    - *What would be the point of talking through a server when you can do it better in face to face in class? This would fall into the "busy work" category.*
- Assignments should be read and commented on in a timely fashion. Students can feel punished for completing an assignment that will not be read and/or has no quality expectation or value.
    - *Show students that their views are important. If you want students to take the time to write what they think; take the time to read and respond.*

- Don't overuse posting a comment as a feedback technique to check for student understanding. The danger is that students will rush to get assignment done, and the posting will result in generic comments that are neither thoughtful nor grounded in the literature.
    - *Pick your battles so to speak… stress what is really important.*
- Don't pack the assignments too closely together. Teaching on-line requires some "breathing room" in assignments, due to the nature of the time for necessary for students to read and complete assignments, and for the instructor to access and read them.
    - *Two points: first, remember that whatever you assign, you should grade; and second, if you pack in the assignments you will receive quantity over quality and the major points may be missed by the students.*
- Post a day and time when assignments are due, at least several days before the next scheduled class.
    - *The time is especially important. Students need structure and detail more than usual in this class because they don't have the teacher's presence as a constant reminder. I personally have turned in a few assignments at 11:59 PM on the "day" that it was due. I am sure the teacher was expecting it at a more reasonable hour, but technically it was not late.*
- Develop teams or cohort groups to work through case discussions.
    - *It is great to work with on others with cases, but it is easy to have personality conflicts. Give the students time to work out their group dynamics as they solve cases together.*
- Use these same cohort groups to design final projects.
    - *By pooling resources, there is a greater likelihood of designing a quality final product, than if individuals were required to complete final projects by themselves. Teams can bring unique strengths and perspectives to a project.*

ACCOUNTABILITY

I – One of the more challenging aspects of teaching on-line with cases is accountability.

- Use on-line group peer review, with a copy to the instructor, and have students swap case analyses.
    - *Students can be much harder on themselves than teachers are. It helps for the teacher to be in a more neutral position and an approachable resource for the students.*
- Give examples whenever possible. For example, post what acceptable and unacceptable on-line case responses look like.
    - *It would be helpful to provide example questions to guide student responses. Consider how formal you want the student voice to be – first person or third person. Be clear as to whether acceptable responses are instinctual or require research and/or citations from the literature. Should previous class discussions be alluded to in written responses*?
- Take digital photos of the class and post on-line.
    - *This shows off the teacher's technology skills right away and personalizes the class as you can now put a name with a face. Besides, it's fun!*
- Share email addresses of all class members.
    - *Again, this increases the likelihood that students will communicate and interact with one another around case studies and assignments.*
- Check all assignments weekly and provide written or oral feedback.
    - *Students need to know where they stand in the class.*
- Use peer review on group projects to assure all members are engaged and contributing.

- *Having students fill out peer review forms on themselves and everyone in their group helps motivate all students to participate. A negative aspect of group work is that one or two people often do the lion's share of the work. Peer review guards against students who minimally contribute to group work getting full credit for a group assignment.*

- Have rubrics in place in which to assess case analyses, responses, and final projects.
  - *To save time and avoid confusion, reference these rubrics as much as possible as both an expectation and assessment tool.*
- Use outside judges for case competitions.
  - *Using experts from other institutions or organizations to judge case competitions lends an air of fairness and objectivity to the evaluations. Feedback should always be matched to a rubric and include positive comments as well as constructive suggestions.*
- Proportion percentages of assignments according to their value and relevance to the course objectives – don't give all assignments to same weight.
  - *This only seems fair. It doesn't make sense to give an assignment that only takes a few hours the same percentage as an assignment that extends over several weeks.*
- Keep excellence records of class attendance on-line and in class.
  - *Post the attendance on-line if possible. For students, it's the closest thing you can get on-line to a teacher noticing you sneak in late to class.*
- Keep excellent records or assignments completed and grades.
- Post specific expectations of what it takes to takes to get an A, B, or C.
  - *Students are always concerned about grades. Course dissatisfaction may arise if students don't have a clear idea what they need to do to earn high marks in the class, or what constitutes the difference between an A or a B, or a B and a C.*
- Conduct a formative evaluation mid-semester to check on student learning.
  - *This can help refocus the group and fill in the gaps in understanding or technology before moving on.*
- Also have students give feedback mid-semester to the instructor, as well as course evaluations at the end of the semester.
  - *Discuss changes that can be made from the students' feedback. Students will feel that the teacher is listening to their needs and suggestions and making positive course improvements.*
- Adjust course curriculum and assignments, as needed, every semester to assure that content is current, meaningful, and meets students' needs.
  - *Students talk among themselves about courses and instructors. They know which instructors willingly make accommodations to their courses to improve students' learning and experiences.*

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching on-line is not for the faint of heart: it will not alleviate poor quality teaching, replace content area experts, or substitute as a crash course in technology. In fact, all three of these issues must be addressed, including the skills and expectations of participants, in order to be successful on-line. Effective on-line teaching requires fluency in all these arenas.

The on-line medium is dynamic and ever changing, making it hard to stay current. Those who choose to successfully engage in on-line course delivery must develop close collaborations with colleagues in their content areas and with technology support staff, as well as become risk-takers in developing strategies for the on-line engagement of students. Feedback from students is essential in helping to assess the success of on-line content, assignments, student learning, and course satisfaction.

An area of teaching on-line that is becoming increasingly popular is that of using case studies to illustrate real life problems and applications in content areas such as medicine, business, dentistry, and education. The case dilemmas in this session are drawn from teacher education; however the recommendations for on-line learning are applicable to a variety of content areas using case studies.

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